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TAGS: PREL ECON BO RU LO

SUBJECT: LAVROV VISIT REINVIGORATED BILATERAL TALKS ON  
ECONOMY, ENERGY

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (C) Summary: The working visit of Russian FM Lavrov to Slovakia focused on renewing dialogue on economic and energy issues. Lavrov expressed the Russian desire to continue supplying oil, gas, and nuclear materials for Slovakia's energy needs. On Belarus, Slovak FM Kukan reportedly was forceful in private regarding the flawed elections. Lavrov conceded that Lukashenko was not an ideal leader, but should be dealt with over the long term. Publicly Kukan said Slovakia and Russia had "agreed to disagree." The next step in the bilateral relationship may be an autumn visit to Moscow by Slovak President Gasparovic. End summary.

¶2. (C) According to Peter Juza of the MFA Department for CIS and the Balkans, the April 4-5 visit of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was a routine working visit. Lavrov comes every year to commemorate the April 4 anniversary of the WWII liberation of Bratislava by Russian troops. This year, Lavrov had meetings with President Gasparovic, PM Dzurinda, and FM Kukan, and participated in commemoration ceremonies of the Bratislava liberation.

Energy and Economic Cooperation

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¶3. (C) Juza said the most notable accomplishment of the visit was that a bilateral commission that has been stagnant for two years began functioning again, with discussions in two areas: economic cooperation and energy. Economic relations mainly focused on manufacturing and food products. Lavrov emphasized that Russia wants to be a stable partner for energy supply, but there must be stability on both sides, and he gave Ukraine's siphoning of gas from the pipeline an example of an "unstable" partner.

¶4. (C) The Russian-Slovak contracts on energy supply end in 2008, and during the energy dialogue, Lavrov confirmed Russian willingness to guarantee longer-term contracts for energy supply. He discussed Russia's plan to liberalize prices for energy throughout the CIS, due to pressure from the World Bank and world markets. Lavrov asked that Russian companies not be excluded from participating in tenders to supply inputs for Slovakia's nuclear energy plants. (Note: Nuclear plants are already privatized, so Lavrov's request was that the government not place obstacles in the way of Russian companies.) Regarding a bid for the GOS to buy back ownership in the oil pipeline running through Slovakia from Rusnaft, Slovakia has decided to take some time to do "research" before proceeding.

Slovakia Takes Tough Stance on Belarus

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¶5. (C) Kukan reportedly held a tough line during discussions on Belarus, and publicly announced that Slovakia and Russia

had simply "agreed to disagree." Juza told Pol-Ec Chief that Lavrov insisted the electoral process in Belarus had been "constitutionally correct." While the conduct of the campaign was poor, the electoral process in Belarus had been better than that in Ukraine. Russia did not want to make Belarus a black hole, and although Russia agreed Lukashenko was not an ideal leader, removing him from office must be a long-term process. Kukan's chief of staff told DCM that Lavrov's spin was that Russia had its own way to influence Lukashenko, including establishing market prices for gas supply and pressuring Lukashenko on the great Belarus-Russia "Union." Lubomir Rehak, who will soon depart to become Slovak Charge d'Affaires in Minsk, was more cynical. In his view, the liberalization of gas prices was intended to pressure Lukashenko to privatize the gas pipeline (in favor of a Russian company, of course) and not to achieve a political result.

¶6. (C) In discussions on Ukraine, Lavrov said Ukraine was free to make its own decisions regarding possible membership in Euro-Atlantic structures, but it must be aware that Moscow will react to integration moves.

¶7. (C) Finally, Lavrov invited President Gasparovic to visit Russia in the October-November timeframe. The main question now is of protocol; Slovakia is holding out for a State Visit.

¶8. (C) Comment: There was little press coverage of Lavrov's visit, perhaps because it was characterized as a "working" visit. Juza said that the Slovak population has a neutral attitude toward Russia. Slovaks feel a "fellow Slav" affinity for Russian people. On the other hand, they don't see any reason for Russia to exercise much influence over events in Slovakia. Only the older generation remembers the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Juza said the

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students he teaches at the university level are mostly ignorant about Soviet/Russian history. They don't know about Stalin; they don't know about Glasnost; they don't have preconceptions.

VALLEE